

A REMARK ON THE PROBLEM OF THE DATE OF MAHĀVĪRA

The chronology of Mahāvīra has been discussed by scholars for a long time with a view to determining the exact place of Jainism in Indian and World History. A certain degree of *communis opinio* has been agreed on by modern scholars that Mahāvīra attained Nirvāṇa around 468 B.C. If the historicity of this date could be established, we would be in the fortunate position of possessing an established chronology for a period long before Alexander's Indian Campaigns. We should, however, carefully test the foundations on which this assumption rests.

To begin with, the usually accepted date of Mahāvīra's Nirvāṇa is not in accordance with the date of Mahāvīra's Nirvāṇa as recorded by the Jainas themselves. The Śvetāmbaras place it in 528 B.C., and the Digambaras in 510 B.C. The date 468 B.C. which is found in modern scholarly publications, is based on rather complicated calculations by Hermann Jacobi, Jarl Charpentier and others. These scholars derived their information mainly from the works of Hemacandra and Merutuṅga.

Concerning the arguments presented by H. Jacobi, I would like to draw reader's attention to his remarks in the introduction to his edition of Hemacandra's *Sthavirāvalīcarita* or *Parīṣiṣṭaparvan*. There, he states that the historical character of at least some of the patriarchs in the *Sthavirāvalī* has already been established by Georg Bühler, and that « the part of the *Sthavirāvalī* which we can now control proves to contain an on the whole trustworthy account of the development of the Śvetāmbara branch of the Jainas which shows only such accidental mistakes and omissions as may be expected to occur in a late redaction of an oral tradition »¹.

1. *Sthavirāvalīcarita* or *Parīṣiṣṭaparvan*, being an Appendix of the *Triṣaṣṭiśālā-kāpuruṣacarita* by Hemacandra, ed. by Hermann Jacobi, 2nd ed., Calcutta, 1932, Introduction, p. XVI.

On the other hand, Jacobi found the greatest difficulty in adjusting the list of the patriarchs to fit with the chronology as handed down in the same sources. To quote again from Jacobi's introduction: « And as Bhadrabāhu died 170 A.V., and Rohagupta was living in 544 A.V., the intermediate four patriarchates should have lasted 374 years! This interval yields an average length of each patriarchate, in this period of about 94 years! This is quite absurd. On the other hand, the interval of 40 years between the last two schisms covers, in the *Therāvalī*, four patriarchates, each of an average duration of no more than ten years, a result which errs in an opposite sense from the preceding one »².

Surprisingly, Jacobi, without any attempt at explaining this contradiction of his earlier statement that the *Therāvalī* proves to contain a reliable account of the paramparā of teachers, continues with the statement that « we arrive at the conclusion that the list of theras is imperfectly handed down; there must have been far more theras than are contained in the *Therāvalī* »³. Evidently, this conclusion is based on his rather absolute faith in the chronological information found in the sources, though, in the very next sentence, Jacobi states: « One fundamental fault vitiating the early records of the Jainas is the confusion prevailing in their system of chronology »⁴.

Such confusion becomes visible indeed if we review the various attempts of Indian and Western scholars to establish the chronology of Mahāvīra. In his so-called second approach, Jacobi claimed to have disproved the statement found in three *Sūtras* of the *Tipiṭaka* (*Pāsādikasuttanta* and *Saṅgītisuttanta* of the *Dīghanikāya*, and *Sāmagāmasutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya*) that Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, i.e. Mahāvīra, passed away before the Buddha. This he does on the strength of a purely chronological argument, viz. of the date 484 B.C. which he calculated for the Buddha's Nirvāṇa and the date 477 B.C. for Mahāvīra's Nirvāṇa as calculated from Hemacandra's *Parīśiṣṭaparvan*. Both dates are reckoned back from Candragupta's accession to the throne, viz. 162 years in the Buddhist chronicles from Ceylon, but only 155 years in Hemacandra's *Parīśiṣṭa*.

No less problematic are the arguments of some other scholars, e.g. of K. P. Jayaswal who places Mahāvīra's Nirvāṇa in 546 B.C. and of A. Santiraja Sastri who calculates 662 B.C. A group of Jain scholars, including Muni Kalyana Vijayaji, Shanti Lal Shah, Muni Shri Nagraj and others argue in favour of the traditional date, 528 or 527 B.C. while H. C. Seth proposes 488 B.C., C. D. Chatterjee 486 B.C. etc. etc.

The question of the reliability of the chronology as handed down in Jain sources has already been discussed by André Bareau in his

2. *Ibid.*, p. XVII.

3. *Ibid.*, p. XVIII.

4. *Ibid.*, p. XVIII.

fundamental contribution on the date of the Buddha's Nirvāṇa⁵. There, he arrived at the conclusion that « the most decisive argument » for the generally agreed date of 468 B.C. for the Nirvāṇa of Mahāvīra consists of its agreement with the generally accepted date of the Nirvāṇa of the Buddha, viz. ca. 480 B.C.

If this is the case, however, the date of Mahāvīra's Nirvāṇa as calculated by modern scholars on the basis of Jaina traditional chronology, cannot be upheld any more. I refer here to my contribution on the date of the Buddha⁶ where it has been established that the so-called corrected Ceylonese chronology, i.e. ca. 480 B.C., does not represent a reliable historical tradition. There cannot be much doubt that the Buddha's Nirvāṇa should be dated much later, probably around 350 B.C.

However, apart from the Buddhist chronology, another argument in favour of the traditionally adopted Jaina chronology has been quoted. As J. Filliozat has pointed out, the date 313 B.C. for Candragupta's accession to the throne is not only handed down in a particular Jaina chronology, but also in ancient Western sources⁷. Therefore, this Jaina chronology must be founded on an ancient and reliable chronological tradition. The question remains, however, what conclusions we may draw from this ancient chronological information. Though it provides a correct date for Candragupta's accession to the throne, this does not necessarily imply that the author had correct chronological information for the earlier period. To recall a corresponding case from the discussion of the early Buddhist sources, we know that Ceylonese chronology is reliable from Duṭṭhagāmaṇi onwards, but not earlier, though the list of kings is reliable as far back as Devānampiyatissa who is dated 65 years too early in the Ceylonese chronicles. Moreover, there is no agreement of the Jaina chronology of the early period with that of the Buddhist sources, because 528 B.C. for the Nirvāṇa of Mahāvīra would lead us to ca. 525 for Buddha's Nirvāṇa, but not to 544 B.C. nor 480 B.C. as are reckoned in the traditional and in the corrected Ceylonese chronologies respectively.

Fortunately, the contemporaneity of the Buddha and the Mahāvīra remains beyond any doubt, but it seems that so far we do not have convincing arguments for accepting any of the current chronologies for either of the two great teachers.

Therefore, the only way to establish roughly the dates of the Mahāvīra and the Buddha seems to be to calculate from the lists of the so-called patriarchs. In the case of the Buddha's Nirvāṇa, this leads us to a date which is rather near to the so-called short or Indian chrono-

5. ANDRÉ BAREAU, *La date du Nirvāṇa*, in JA (1953), pp. 53-6.

6. HEINZ BECHERT, *The Date of the Buddha Reconsidered*, in IT, 10 (1982), pp. 29-36.

7. JEAN FILLIOZAT, *La date de l'avènement de Candragupta roi du Magadha*, in « Journal des savants » (1978), pp. 175-84.

logy, and, as I have hinted before, the Jaina *Therāvalī* too suggests a much later date than the one found in our history books.

For further details, I may be allowed to refer to my above-quoted paper on the date of the Nirvāṇa of the Buddha⁸ and to a more detailed study on the early Buddhist chronology which is under preparation⁹.

It should be added, however, that my doubts about the traditional chronology are fully confirmed by the comprehensive recent study of the early Buddhist and Jaina chronology by P. H. L. Eggermont, who arrives at similar results, though partly by a different way of argumentation¹⁰.

8. See above, note 6.

9. This study is to appear in the NAWG, and it will include a re-examination of the problems posed by the so-called Dotted Record.

10. P. H. L. EGGERMONT, *New Notes on Aśoka and his Successors*, in « Persica », 2 (1965-66), pp. 27-70; 4 (1969), pp. 77-120; 5 (1970-71), pp. 69-102 and 8 (1979), pp. 55-93. See particularly 5, pp. 95-8 and 8, pp. 57-69 and 82-8.